

What is Employment First?

While there is no formal definition for Employment First, the intent is to raise expectations that employment should be prioritized for individuals with disabilities. Employment First might be defined as changing a system to better support integrated employment. As with any plan for change, we must determine the strengths and the barriers of state agencies and disability service organizations to achieving better employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Thereafter, we must act to build on the strengths and eliminate the barriers.

States with Employment First initiatives have taken different paths with their efforts. While early efforts in some states focused exclusively on individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, states are finding that the principles remain the same for all disabilities. Employment First efforts funded through the Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, mandate multiple state agency partnerships.

“... critical agencies at each level of government must work together to align policies, regulations, planning and funding to ensure a consistent approach to systems transformation and strategy implementation. The need for such alignment of our public system of disability services has been recognized and suggested by subject-matter experts, advocates and individual Federal agencies as the critical first step in a successful employment systems transformation.”

- [ODEP Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program
Performance Work Statement, 20 July 2011]

Florida is taking a broad approach by including all major state agencies and disability service organizations in planning for Employment First. Florida's work will be focused on building capacity and sustainability, maximizing resources through systems coordination, and evaluating outcomes.

At the state level, an Employment Coalition with over 40 members representing all major state agencies and disability service organizations will meet to work toward implementation of Executive Order 13-284 and the Governor's Commission for Jobs for Floridians with Disabilities 2013 Report recommendations. A smaller group and sub-committees will likely be formed from this coalition to ensure activities move from the planning to implementation stages. From the grassroots level, self-advocates tell us it is important to ensure that everyone's voice is heard—family, job developers, teachers, and self-advocates. Florida's Alliance for Full Participation, which is a grassroots level group working to improve employment outcomes, will ensure that everyone's voice is heard and will assist with getting the message out in their communities. Moreover, the Employment First Grassroots Florida Group will reach broadly into the trenches of Florida via webinars.

Our desired ultimate outcome is for Florida to have a better system that supports employment and self-sufficiency for all individuals with disabilities!